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# A History of Byzantium

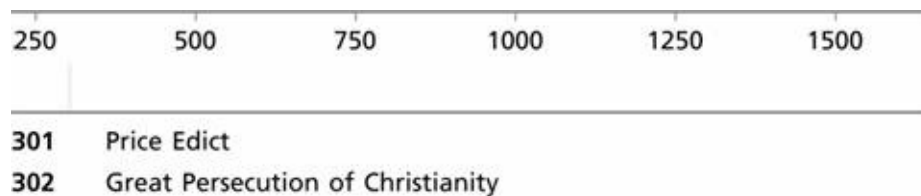
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## ***The Revival under Diocletian***



### **The Rise of Diocletian (284–305)**

After the death of the emperor Carus (282–4) the army in the East chose Diocletian, one of their officers, as emperor. In the West, Carinus (the son of Carus) refused to accept this proclamation and prepared for battle. The two armies met (285) in Moesia, and the forces of Carinus had the upper hand, but just at that moment Carinus fell to an assassin, and Diocletian was proclaimed by both armies.

Diocletian was, like most of his predecessors, a military officer from the Balkan peninsula. Unlike them, however, he was able to implement his reforms, and his rule marks the end of the crisis of the third century and the beginning of a new period of greater stability, as well as a new direction in imperial policy. He was not an innovator, and most of his policies had been anticipated by one or another of his predecessors. Nonetheless, Diocletian was a hard-working and talented administrator and he was able to build on the failures of previous emperors.

Diocletian's first task was to stabilize his own power and provide firm military leadership for the whole of the empire. Experience had shown that the army (and probably the empire as a whole) was simply too large for a single person to administer effectively, and Diocletian sought a colleague to work with him in

this task. For this he chose Maximian, an old comrade in arms, whom he named as caesar and sent to Gaul to deal with the rebellion of the Bagaudae (bands of robbers) and the incursions of the Germans in Gaul. Maximian was successful in both of these and Diocletian rewarded him with promotion to the rank of *augustus*. Diocletian, meanwhile, was active in the East, restoring Roman power on the Danube, in Armenia and Mesopotamia, and in Egypt.

## The Tetrarchy

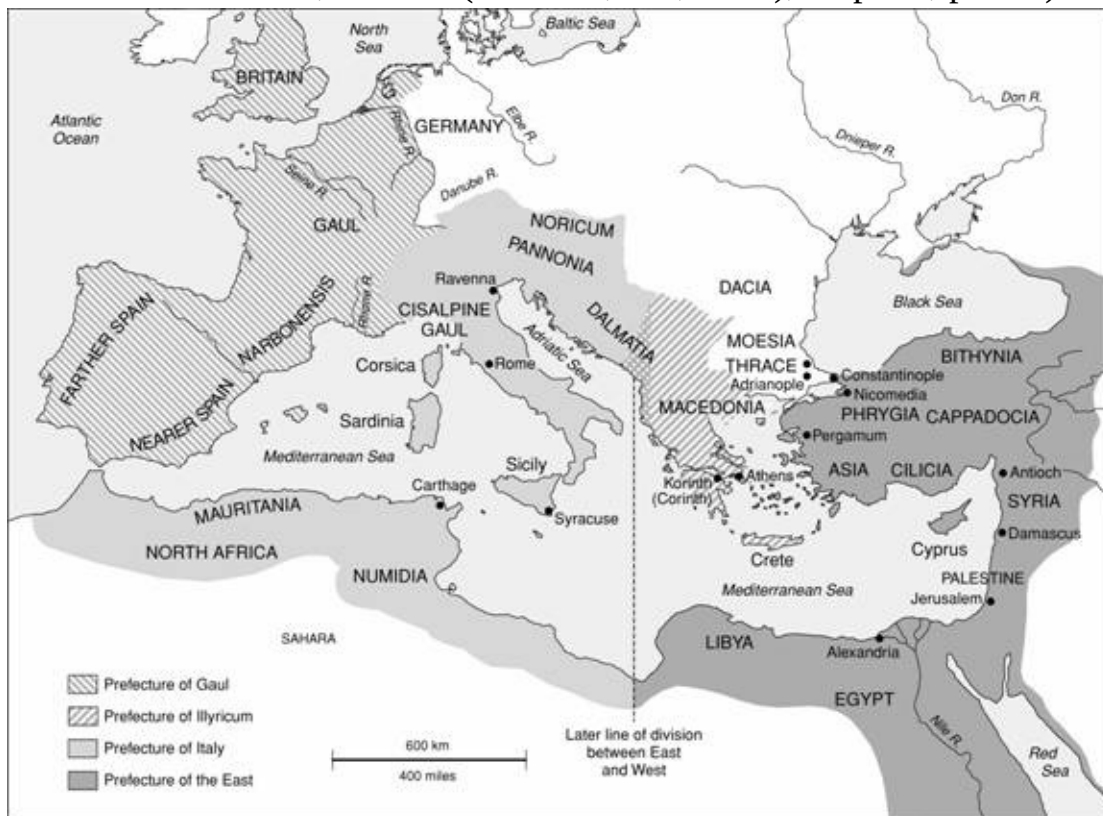
In Britain and northwest Gaul, however, the rebel Carausius had established himself, and he resisted all attempts to oust him. Perhaps for this reason, Diocletian decided to expand the concept of collegial rule and he appointed two caesars (*caesares*, junior emperors, who were given the title *nobilissimus*) as assistants to the two *augusti* (senior emperors). Thus, he named a Danubian officer, Galerius, as his own caesar, and Constantius Chlorus, yet another Danubian, as the caesar of Maximian. This system, called the Tetrarchy (or “rule of four men”) was designed to preserve the integrity of imperial power while broadening the exercise of that authority. Thus, in theory there was no division of the empire: laws issued by each emperor were valid throughout the empire, and each ruler was to consult with and cooperate with the others. In fact, the superior authority of Diocletian served to keep the system together, and each emperor was responsible for governmental functions in a given part of the state: Constantius in the northwest (Gaul and Britain), Maximian in Italy and North Africa, Diocletian in the Balkans and Asia Minor, and Galerius in the East. Each of them had his own court, military and administrative organization, and style of governing. Nevertheless, especially under the watchful eye of Diocletian, the senior *augustus*, all imperial propaganda stressed the cooperation among the emperors and their solidarity in the face of potential enemies, domestic and foreign. Furthermore, the Tetrarchy was designed to solve one of the foremost political problems of the Roman state: the issue of the succession. Thus, the caesars were promised that they would, in time, succeed their respective *augusti* and then choose new caesars to perpetuate the dynasties. Diocletian emphasized his connection with divine power and his place as senior emperor by taking the name *Jovius* (Jupiter-like) for himself and Galerius, while the name *Herculius* (Hercules-like) was assigned to Maximian and Constantius.



# Military Successes

Freed from the constant threat of civil war, Diocletian and his colleagues were able to turn their attention to matters of military concern and domestic reform. Constantius was given the task of subduing the usurper Carausius. He first defeated the usurper's barbarian allies; Carausius was assassinated in 293, and in 296 Constantius invaded Britain and restored Roman power in the whole of the island south of Hadrian's Wall. He then returned to the mainland and thoroughly defeated the Alamanni in 298, bringing many years of peace and quiet to Gaul. In 296 there was a revolt in Egypt that Diocletian had to put down, and, while he was thus occupied, Narses, the king of Persia, took advantage of the situation and invaded Armenia and Syria. Galerius was put in charge of operations against the Persians. He was at first defeated, in 297, but the next year he was able to win an overwhelming victory, including the capture of the king's harem. He followed this by reconquering Mesopotamia and then forced the Persians into a peace which recognized Roman dominance throughout the East.

**Map 2.1** The restored Roman Empire, ca. AD 300 (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 6.4, p. 153)



# The Position of the Emperor and his Court

The reforms carried out by Diocletian and his successor Constantine departed notably from the system of government established by Augustus and modified over time by his successors. Obviously, many of the elements of these reforms had been introduced by one or more of the third-century emperors, and we can see these changes as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, yet their cumulative effect – and the luxury of a period without disruptive civil or foreign wars – gave them a new character. It is also not always possible to distinguish the measures introduced by Diocletian from those of Constantine. Thus, we will discuss the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine together at this point in our narrative, but it should be borne in mind that we cannot always tell who the author of an individual measure was, let alone what his motives were. In the troubled situation of the time, governmental changes may have been more a matter of expedience than of policy, and we can only wonder that the system worked as well as it did.

At the heart of the Diocletianic system was the elevated position of the emperor. The empire of Augustus is often described as the “principate” (rule of the “first citizen”) while that of Diocletian is known as the “dominate” (rule of the *dominus* or “lord”). The emperor was secluded from the general public in an elaborate palace and surrounded by a court that was involved in a ceaseless round of ceremonial. Much of this was copied, quite directly, from the court of the Sassanid Persians. Thus, everything about the emperor was “sacred”: his bedchamber was the *sacrum cubiculum* and his council of state the *sacrum consistorium*. The emperor wore distinctive clothes: richly embroidered garments studded with precious stones and a jewel-encrusted diadem. His clothes were colored with a purple dye that commoners were forbidden ever to use. The emperor was no longer to be seen as an ordinary human being who went about his business like other people; instead, he moved about the city in elaborate processions and appeared to his people and to ambassadors from abroad in carefully orchestrated audiences and manifestations. He acted, in other words, like a god, and his divinity – or connection with god – was stressed wherever possible. As we have seen, the members of the Tetrarchy were closely connected with the gods Jupiter and Hercules, and in this new system the power of the emperor was seen as descending directly from the gods, rather than ascending from the will of the people, as had generally been the case under the earlier empire. Thus, Diocletian and his colleagues followed the lead of

emperors such as Aurelian, who had stressed the divine aspect of their rule. Of course, in many ways this was nothing other than a new twist on the old idea of the emperor cult that stretched back to the days of the principate, but the emphasis placed on the divine origin of imperial power was something new at this time.

As the emperor withdrew into the narrow confines of palace and court, those who were close to him naturally gained considerable real power, though not always the prestige that went with it. Thus, the members of the emperor's family, especially his wife and mother, and the chamberlains and other domestic servants (who were often eunuchs) gained appreciably in power. They frequently controlled access to the emperor, and individuals who wished to present petitions or seek the ear of the emperor often had first to secure the favor of these influential people.

## **Administrative Reforms**

The purposes of the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine were twofold: to provide effective government and to avoid usurpation. The latter goal is easy to understand, and it is often cited as the primary purpose of the reforms, an effort to spread power broadly throughout the political system so as to prevent the rise of the "over-powerful subject" who might rise to a position that would threaten that of the emperor. Nonetheless, it is clear that the broader goal of providing good and effective government throughout the empire was just as important. In many ways the task of governing the empire had grown too large for the relatively simple administrative structure established by Augustus and developed by his successors. Both because the empire was large in size and varied in almost all its aspects, and because more and more tasks of government were being shifted to the central administration, the imperial government often simply did not have the resources to deal with the problems that it faced without considerable reorganization. The reforms of Diocletian and Constantine were designed to resolve these problems.

In the first place, there was henceforth a strict division between civil and military aspects of government. Distinct hierarchies existed, and individuals in one "branch" of government normally did not cross over to the other. Civil officials no longer had any troops at their disposal or any military responsibilities, while military commanders had no direct access to the civil administration. Most important, there was a strict separation of the tax-collecting

system from the military, and military commanders had to seek supplies and payment for their troops from the appropriate civilian officials.

The civil bureaucracy was vastly increased at this time, in order to handle the increased task of governing the empire, and the number of administrative subdivisions was likewise made greater, with each of them smaller in size than they had been previously. The basic organizational structure of the state remained the individual city (Greek *polis*, Latin *civitas*) with its surrounding territory; each city was administered locally by a city council (Greek *boule*, Latin *curia*) made up of wealthy individuals. In the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, however, the provinces were subdivided and made smaller, increasing the number from about 50 to around 100, and each province was included in a new administrative district called a diocese. There were 12 of these dioceses, each of them administered by a vicar (*vicarius*). The dioceses, in turn, were grouped into four praetorian prefectures, each of them controlled by a praetorian prefect, who was the chief administrative official and right-hand man of one of the emperors. The civil administrative structure, therefore, looked something like this:

**Area ruled (in decreasing size)   Rulers or administrators**

|                            |                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| empire (or part of empire) | emperor                         |
| prefectures                | praetorian prefects             |
| dioceses                   | vicars ( <i>vicarii</i> )       |
| provinces                  | provincial governors            |
| cities                     | city councils ( <i>curiae</i> ) |

Within the central government there were numerous bureaus to deal with civil affairs, especially financial ones. The heads of those departments, along with the chief military officers, were members of the *comitatus* (imperial court). Among these were the following:

- *magister officiorum* (Master of Offices): responsible for court ceremonial, transport, the secret police;
- *comes sacrarum largitionum* (Count of the Sacred Largesse): responsible for mines, mints, collection of certain taxes, and payment of special bonuses to the troops;
- *comes rei privatae* (Count of the Emperor's Private Account): responsible for management of the emperor's vast personal wealth, especially large tracts of rental land;
- *praepositus sacri cubiculi* (chamberlain, chief eunuch): who often controlled access to the emperor.

# Military Reform

As we have seen, the military chain of command was separated from that of the civil administration, and military service became more of a career unto itself. In addition, there were changes in the organization of the army. The old border troops of the empire, stationed in permanent camps along the border, were called the *limitanei*. These became essentially a local militia, poor in training and martial spirit and made up of peasants who were willing to defend their own territory but who might not be anxious to fight farther away. The *limitanei* were allowed to exist, but their importance declined considerably. Much more important were the mobile field armies, the *comitatenses*. These were stationed in the interior of the empire in large concentrations, but they were never located in fixed permanent quarters; they were always ready to move, at a moment's notice, to meet a threat to the empire. The *comitatenses* were primarily infantry, but the cavalry, especially the heavily armed soldiers, were increasingly important. Finally, there were various kinds of imperial guards: the old Praetorian Guards existed until they were abolished by Constantine. After that the *scholae* and other guards' units protected the emperor; they were picked troops, impressive for their physical appearance, and they came to play an increasingly ceremonial function, although they could still act to protect (or overthrow) an emperor, and the emperor could bring the guards directly to the battlefield to take part in a war effort.

At the top of the military hierarchy, in a position similar to that of the praetorian prefect, was the *magister militum* (or *magistri militum*, since there was normally more than one) who frequently acted as commander of the army, unless the emperor sought to fulfill this task himself. Below the *magister militum* were the *comites* (singular *comes*) and below the *comites* were the *duces* (singular *dux*). The military chain of command thus strongly reflected that of the civil administration, although the latter may, in fact, have been developed on the basis of the military structure.

## **Military command structure (in descending order)**

Emperor: supreme commander

*Magister militum* (plural *magistri militum*): field commander; normally several, often corresponding to the area ruled by an emperor

*Comes* (*comites* or *comites rei militaris*): literally “companion,” commanders of broad regions (e.g., Africa, parts of Gaul)

*Dux* (*duces*): “leader,” local military commanders



# Economic Policies

A primary duty of the civil administration was the preparation of a state budget and the collection of the taxes necessary to pay for it. The primary tax was the *annona*, a land tax that was, at the time, payable largely in kind: that is, payment was normally made in grain, oil, and other foodstuffs. These goods were taken by the state and distributed to state officials and the military. Such payment in kind was necessary because of the near-complete collapse of the monetary economy in the third century and the concern of the state that it receive income that was not devalued as a result of the economic crisis.

Collection of the *annona* was based on a system called *capitatio-iugatio*. This system called for a regular census (*indictio*) on land, at first every five years, later every 15. At the time of the *indictio* the property of every landowner was evaluated, for both quantity and quality, with higher figures assigned for better quality land than for poorer land. In addition, this evaluation was modified by a consideration of the amount of labor available to work the land. Thus, a man counted for more than a woman and a woman more than a child, although all were recorded; and the number and the kind of animals, both those used for draft and those used for food, affected the tax liability. In the end, a base number was assigned to the taxpayer, but this was not the final tax, merely an index that would be used to calculate the family's tax liability. The praetorian prefect, in consultation with the emperor and other members of the court, would determine an amount of income the state would need in a given year. This total figure was then divided among all the available landowners, on the basis of the figures that had been obtained at the time of the *indictio*. The duty of actually collecting the taxes was passed on to the individual provincial governors and, from them, on to each city. The councils (*curiae*) of each city were then made collectively responsible for the collection of the taxes; in the

## Box 2.1 Diocletian's Attempt to Control Prices

The emperor Diocletian assumed that the escalating inflation over the previous halfcentury was caused simply by the greed of suppliers and merchants. Therefore, in 301 he issued an edict (generally known simply as Diocletian's Price Edict), published in both Greek and Latin and set up in most of the important cities of the empire. The inscription was prefaced by a long condemnation of the profiteering going on at the time, and then provided a list of maximum prices for goods and services. It is remarkable that a government of the time believed that it could control prices in this manner, and it is clear that the attempt failed; but the document, along with other records that have survived, provides us with important information about the economy of that age.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to convert sums of money from the past into anything meaningful today, but a list of some of the maximum prices in Diocletian's edict provide at least a comparative cost for items. The prices in the edict were given in *denarii communes*, which were not real coins, but a standard of account used by the government that could be converted to real money, based on the rates of exchange that prevailed at the time. Below is a sample of some of the items listed in the Price Edict:

- 1 day's wages for a baker: 50 *denarii* (d.c.)
- 1 day's wages for a farm laborer: 25 *denarii*
- 1 day's wages for a picture painter: 150 *denarii*
- 1 Italian pound [about 325 grams] of pork: 12 *denarii*
- 1 Italian pound of beef: 8 *denarii*
- 1 Italian sextarius [about 1/2 liter] of ordinary wine: 8 *denarii*
- 1 modius of wheat (ca. 8 liters): 100 *denarii*
- 1 pair fashionable shoes: 150 *denarii*.

The penalty for charging higher prices was death, but it is not difficult to imagine the real impact of the edict. As the historian Lactantius (who was a hostile contemporary of Diocletian) said, the result of the edict was that merchants were afraid to offer goods for sale, since their cost was higher than what they could charge, and the result was that prices rose even higher than they had been before!

case of a shortfall the members of the council, the *curiales*, were personally responsible for payment of the amount owed to the state, and there can be no doubt that some such local officials were driven to destruction as a result. The system, however, was designed to be fair to the landowners, and to tax them, not on the basis of what they actually produced but on their potential ability to produce, so that a landowner would be encouraged to produce goods in greater quantity, since the tax would in any case remain the same and excess produce would lead to immediate profit for the landowner.

In AD 301 Diocletian attempted to put a stop to inflation by issuing a detailed imperial order, fixing the maximum prices allowed for various goods and services. Copies of this order, with lists of the maximum prices, were prepared and dispatched to major cities throughout the empire. The tone of this so-called Price Edict was harsh and threatening, an indication of the severity of the issue and the approach by which Diocletian hoped to address it. The edict may have had some initial effect, but in the end it was a failure.

At the same time Diocletian sought to reform imperial coinage, which had become nearly worthless over the past 50 years. The value of the coins, it will be remembered, was based on the purity of the metal used and the weight of the individual coins. Diocletian issued a coin made of good-quality gold, called the

*aureus*; each coin was 1/60th of a pound in weight. He hoped to retain this standard, despite inflationary pressures and the continuing demands put upon the state. The income of the government, however, was not sufficient for this and the attempt failed, although it was an indication that Diocletian was aware of the problem. Later on, his successor Constantine was to try a similar policy, issuing a gold coin, called the *solidus*, with each coin weighing 1/72nd of a pound. The *solidus* remained a stable currency for the empire, and much of the medieval world, until the middle of the eleventh century. The long-term stability of the *solidus* is an indication of the eventual success of these economic reforms and the strength of the Byzantine economy.

## Religion and Culture

Diocletian was a soldier and he saw things as a military commander. Thus, he approached reform in a logical, rational manner; he issued strict, detailed orders and expected that they would be obeyed. In making appointments he preferred other military men and he almost completely overlooked the senatorial class, seeking out *equites* and soldiers instead.

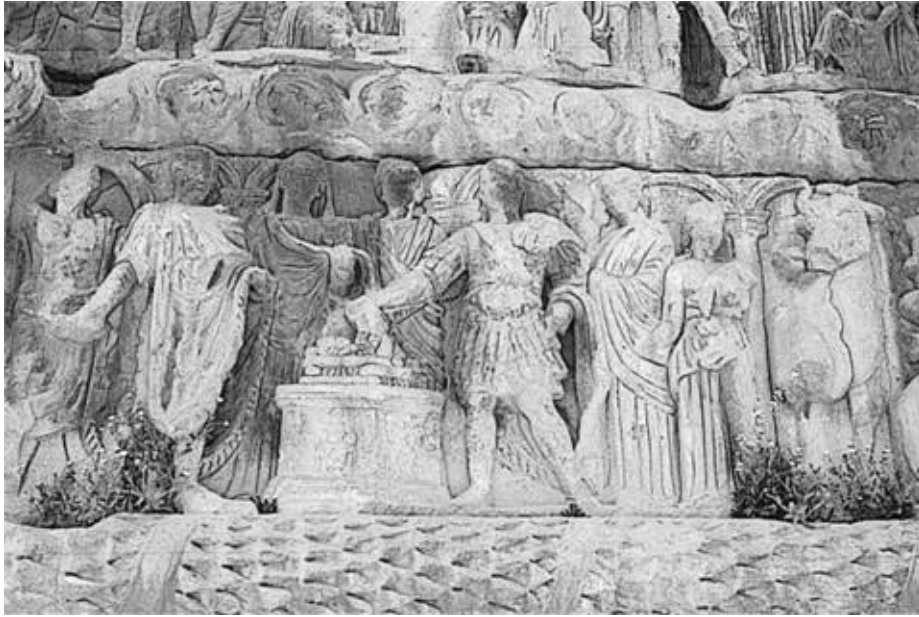
In broader cultural terms the age of the Tetrarchy preferred simple and straightforward representation: architecture, for example, was powerful and heavy, without sophistication or conceit. Sculpture is perhaps the clearest indication of the spirit of the age: somewhat abstract and simple, with figures presented in heavy, almost exaggerated realism – emperors who all look alike, with thick necks, close-cropped hair, and stubbly beards. The representation of the Tetrarchs, a porphyry group now in San Marco's in Venice ([fig. 2.1](#)), is perhaps the best example of this approach, as are the many coins and medallions of the emperors. The Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki likewise proclaims the military power of the emperors, their defeat of the Persians, and the harmony between the gods and the rulers of Rome in simple and clear-cut statements ([fig. 2.2](#)).

**Figure 2.1** The Tetrarchs. Porphyry group, San Marco, Venice. This sculpture depicts the Tetrarchs the way they wanted to be viewed: strong, determined, tough, and – most of all – united. They are shown in the typical style of the day, with stubbly beards, short, thick necks, and simplified features; they hold each other by the shoulders, while one hand is placed firmly on their swords. This group was taken from Constantinople at the time of the sack of the city in 1204

and brought to Venice, where it is built into the exterior of the cathedral of the city (a broken piece of the original was found in Istanbul and is in the Archaeological Museum there). Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



**Figure 2.2** Arch of Galerius. The Arch of Galerius was erected in Thessaloniki, where Galerius had his official residence. It was to honor the emperor's victory over the Persians in 298. This scene depicts Galerius, dressed as a general, offering sacrifice to the pagan gods for a successful outcome of the war. His hand is stretched out toward an altar, while priests and state officials stand by. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Thus, authoritarianism, uniformity, rigidity, and appeals to strength were the primary characteristics of the age. And these were the obvious and perhaps necessary reactions to the collapse and instability of the period that came before. Furthermore, they probably best explain the emperor's reaction to the Christians and the outbreak of the so-called Great Persecution, which was to become the last attempt of the Roman state to suppress Christianity. During most of his reign Diocletian had ignored the Christians, while his colleague Galerius seems always to have been hostile toward them. Diocletian, perhaps inspired by Galerius and almost certainly irritated by the Christians' refusal to follow his order to sacrifice in the name of the emperor, finally began to persecute the Christians in 302 (the so-called Great Persecution). He ordered that the clergy be arrested and that Christian sacred books be confiscated and destroyed. There was even an attempt to ferret out individual Christians by requiring all citizens of the empire to sacrifice. The persecution was violent but brief, and before his abdication in 305 Diocletian became aware that the policy was a

### **Box 2.2 *The Great Persecution***

The persecution of the Christian church, initiated by Galerius and Diocletian in AD 302, had a powerful impact on later Byzantine Christianity. This persecution was unlike anything that had struck the church previously, in part because it was an official government-initiated attempt to stamp out the religion and in part because it resulted in the suffering and death of many Christians, particularly among the leaders. Most studies of the persecutions have focused on the reasons behind the phenomenon and the legal issues behind it. But it is clear that the persecution affected many aspects of later Christianity as well.



The Great Persecution was aimed directly at the organizational structure of the Christian church, the bishops, the Scriptures, and the church buildings themselves. Although some Christians betrayed their faith in the face of government action, many resisted and were killed. This provided Christians, both at the time of the persecutions and in later centuries, with a heroic set of oppositions: the evil persecutors and those who yielded on the one side and those saints who resisted the emperors' orders, even to the point of death, on the other.

Written accounts of heroic martyrdom were, of course, already known, beginning with that of the protomartyr Stephen (Acts 7:58) and the famous letter from the church of Smyrna on the martyrdom of St. Polycarp (ca. AD 155). But the accounts of the Great Persecution by Eusebios of Caesarea and Lactantius were written by eyewitnesses who described the victims as "countless" in number but – at the same time – essentially failed to present any of their names or the exact circumstances of their death (see Eusebios, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.6: "who could again at that time count the multitude of martyrs throughout each province....").

From the reign of Constantine, of course, the Christian church was triumphant and it could look back on the Great Persecution as a time of great trial just before the final victory. Those who directed the church in this phase had lived through the persecution and it affected the way they saw the relationship between the church and the emperor at that time. The broader phenomenon, and the sources associated with it, encouraged the development of hagiographic myth and the "discovery" of the identities and the heroic resistance of the martyrs: St. Pelagia of Tarsos (who spurned the amorous advances of Diocletian's son), the 10,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia, St. Demetrios (supposedly executed by Maximian), St. George (executed under Diocletian), and many others. These martyrs, then, served as the models for the Christian life in general, and of ascetics more particularly. The Byzantine church, therefore, looked back to a "heroic age," frequently placed in the reign of Diocletian, when the values of renunciation of the world were clearly spelled out in stark terms. In addition, the refusal of the martyrs to compromise their faith, even in the face of enticements and threats – indeed, their frequently mentioned search for martyrdom – became an inspiration for later Byzantines who felt they had to resist the erroneous ways of individual emperors, on either doctrinal or moral grounds. This is certainly one of the explanations for the apparent paradox that, although the Byzantine state was a Christian autocracy, the emperor was very frequently opposed by individuals who were quite willing to defy him openly on religious matters.

failure and he began to relax its terms. The Great Persecution, however, shook the foundations of the Christian church, in part because a significant number of Christians apparently submitted to the imperial will and betrayed their faith. On the other hand, the steadfast resistance of the martyrs and their sometimes horrific deaths set a standard of behavior and resistance to imperial authority that the church was to carry into a new era in which Christianity was to become the dominant religion.

## FURTHER READING

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## PRIMARY SOURCES IN TRANSLATION

Like the previous half-century, the crucial period of the reign of Diocletian has few (and very problematic) narrative sources. Of increasing importance, of course, are the accounts written by Christian writers, although these naturally have their own biases and pose their own problems.

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